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The Perfect Storm *The Condition of California's Forests*

By Representative John T. Doolittle

In California, where over-zealous environmentalism often trumps common sense, our forests are suffering from rampant disease and destruction. In just a matter of days, over 600,000 acres of Southern California's forests have been reduced to mere kindling due in part to overgrown forests that have been infected by the largest bark-beetle infestation in the last 50 years. Due to decades of mismanagement, the thinning of these forests remains largely unpracticed within our state, leaving forests that historically contained just 30 to 40 trees per acre, now filled with 300 to 400 trees per acre. As the events of this week have demonstrated, the gross mismanagement of our state's forests has literally created a "perfect storm" for wildfires.

This week's record blazes have destroyed thousands of homes, and killed 20 people and counting. While Southern California is just beginning to assess the damage from the recent fire destruction, Northern California has learned firsthand the aftermath of these catastrophic fires. Just two years ago, the Star Fire in the Eldorado and Tahoe National Forests destroyed over 16,800 acres of public and private land in my congressional district alone. Unfortunately, like those in Southern California, our Northern California forests remain one escaped camp fire short of exploding into yet another massive blaze due to hazardous fuels and overly-dense forests.

Our current forest policies have allowed 190 million acres of federal land to remain at a dangerously high risk of catastrophic wildfire, insect infestation, and disease. As a result, last year alone, American taxpayers spent over \$1.6 billion fighting record-setting blazes due to overgrown forests. Furthermore, lengthy bureaucratic processes have added to this smoldering danger, as they have kept the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) from being able to fully manage our forests. Just recently, the USFS testified that while treatment of an important project was held up in a three year, 800-step decision making process, a record-setting wildfire eviscerated large swaths of landscape and caused enormous damage to the natural environment as well as to a number of communities. Despite the plea from the National Volunteer Fire Council to "reduce the threats from catastrophic wildfire, insect infestations and disease," federal land managers can only treat about 2.5 million acres out of 190 million each year due to these often unnecessary bureaucratic processes. It is clear that if nothing is done to resolve these

management issues immediately, the entire State of California, and vast Western areas will continue to face the threat of catastrophic wildfire year in and year out.

Sadly, while Southern California continues to burn, the U.S. Senate continues to delay consideration on a critical piece of legislation that would help resolve California's situation. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives earlier this year, addresses this crisis by offering balanced, science-based solutions to ensure that more acres, homes, and most importantly, lives are saved. This bill allows forests to be purposefully thinned, making them less susceptible to devastating fires, like the ones we are experiencing now. Furthermore, it is guided by the belief that excessive bureaucratic procedures can be streamlined without unduly infringing on public participation. Forest management projects would still be subject to rigorous environmental analysis as well as administrative challenges and lawsuits. The difference is, these multiple processes would be completed in a matter of months, rather than years. The Healthy Forests Restoration Act would also combat emerging forest health problems by emphasizing local control and giving forest managers most familiar with the vulnerabilities of a specific area the lead in managing that ecosystem.

As we watch the hillsides of California burn out of control, it has become all too apparent that we can no longer afford to let poor policy fuel California's wildfires. Our forests and communities are in desperate need of comprehensive legislation that will reduce hazardous fuels, treat existing health threats, conserve wildlife habitat, and develop new techniques to fight forest pests and disease. By allowing another fire season to approach without The Healthy Forests Restoration Act, we leave billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of acres of land, and priceless lives in peril.

U.S. Rep. John T. Doolittle has served in the House of Representatives since 1991. As Secretary of the House Republican Conference, he is an elected member of the House Republican Leadership. Doolittle represents California's 4th Congressional District and serves on the Appropriations Committee, Energy and Water and DC Appropriations Subcommittees, and the House Administration Committee.

Editor's note: This column is submitted to be printed in its entirety for your editorial page. Should you need to edit for space or have further questions, please contact Laura Blackann at 202-225-2511.

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